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Oceans and Ecotones in Mary Shelley's *Maurice, or the Fisher's Cot*

Colin Carman (Colorado Mesa University)

Because water has no centre of gravity [...] water takes up a horizontal position.

–Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature* (112)

Oceans, in the epic male tradition, exist only to be traversed and conquered. The English Romantic poet John Keats, in his poem “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” aligns the discovery of classical literature with the first glittering glimpse of a *mundus novus*. “Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,” writes Keats, before likening himself to the first European to see the Pacific from an isthmus in Panama (l. 1). Keats’ sonnet resonates with the maritime feats of Homer’s hero Odysseus whose sailcloth, in Book XI of the *Odyssey*, “stretched taut as she cut the sea all day / and the sun sank and the roads of the world grew dark” (ll. 13–4). The classical figuration of the sea as a glassy surface or road upon which the male hero must complete his quest is ubiquitous in later epics such as the *Aeneid* and *Beowulf*. In the latter text, the titular, all-terrain hero orders a boat that will “ply the waves” and sail “the swan’s road” (ll. 199–200) and later, the “sail-road,” in order to win glory and treasure in a foreign land (l. 1429).

Another Romantic poet and admirer of Homer, Lord Byron, saw the ocean in closely related ways and plied the waves as a sailor and swimmer. During his Grand Tour of 1809–11, he was reading Pope’s translation of the *Iliad* when he traversed the Hellespont in just over one hour. Biographer Ian Gilmour notes that Byron’s swim was a deliberate “emulation of a legendary hero and a considerable feat” and one that he carried into his poetical writings (249). For example, his description of the ocean as “dark-heaving; – boundless, endless, and sublime” in Canto IV of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, helps the poet to shape the reading public’s perception of him as a swimmer who combats the elements (l. 1643).¹ The power of the Byronic hero is premised, in part, on constructing the ocean as a battlefield where the male ego is tested and tried. Consider the following analogy from

Lara, the last of Byron's Eastern tales, in which land and sea and womankind are all lumped together as one awful but alluring mass: "Woman, the field, the ocean, all that gave / Promise of gladness, peril of a grave, / In turn, he tried" (I. viii. 117-9). Clearly Byron never saw a strait or channel he didn't wish to master.²

A contemporary of Keats and a close friend to Lord Byron, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851), recognised this age-old linkage between heroism and the ocean but her fiction presents us with a far less anthropocentric and less competitive way of approaching the shore. In this essay, I will examine oceans in one of her earliest narratives and the relatedness of humans to their ocean environments; thus I'll be describing Shelley's representations of those rich and diverse life-forms that populate the edge between sea and land-mass known as an "ecotone." A spatial term, an ecotone is formed through the comingling of different habitats, as in the area between a woodlot and a nearby meadow. In landscape ecology, the term "ecotone" refers to the relationship of "border, boundary, edge and interior on a landscape" and is "often populated by a rich diversity of life" (Smith and Smith 370). In marine biology, an ecotone is formed through the intermixture of different kinds of oceanic water and the unique faunas that make the process of succession possible. I will also follow Romand Coles' more theoretical application of the term. Reminding us of its etymological roots [*oikos* (dwelling) and *tonus* (tension)], he notes that the ecotone evokes an "image of the fertility and pregnancy of dwelling at the edge of the tension between different people, beings, landscapes" (243). By characterising the ocean as an ecotone in *Maurice, or the Fisher's Cot: A Tale* (1820), Shelley makes explicit a more eco-conscious way of understanding the nature/culture dichotomy (a centrepiece of contemporary ecocritical inquiry) and in terms that directly involve the shifting boundaries between land and sea, saltwater and freshwater, human and animal. Shelley stresses the mutual interconnections amongst these seemingly disparate entities to show how they live and thrive in a horizontal relation to one another.³

There is water, water, everywhere in Shelley's fictional works, from her debut (and most enduring) fiction, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), with its naval

captain narrator who opens the tale as he journeys to the North Pole, to her sixth and final novel *Falkner* (1837). In the former, there is the scene in which Victor Frankenstein renounces his unhallowed scientific endeavours and—in the novel's Prospero moment—dumps his instruments in the waters off the north coast of Scotland. *Falkner*, meanwhile, is set in the seaside resort of Cornwall where “tangled bushes and luxuriant herbage diversified the cliffs,” scenting the “glory of that coast – its exhaustless store of flowers” (5). Given the exhaustlessness of such water-scenes, I will limit my attention to just one of her lesser-known works, not only because *Maurice* has not yet been investigated from an ecologically-oriented perspective, but because its very title is an intermixture of people and places (Maurice and/or Cottage). Written for a child, the narrative is also cantered on a youth whose multiple names (Maurice/Henry) only increase in light of a title (“or the Fisher's Cot”) that suggests the interchangeability of person and place. Maurice and the “cottage under the cliff” are interwoven entities (85). Shelley, as I will show, effectively folds setting into subjectivity and blurs the two.

Her intense interest in the materiality of the sea, rather than in fluidity as some abstract metaphor, can also serve what Hester Blum has termed the prospect and the “practice of oceanic studies that is attentive to the material conditions and praxis of the maritime world, one that draws from the epistemological structures provided by the lives and writings of those for whom the sea was simultaneously workplace, home, passage, penitentiary, and promise” (670). The ocean remains the one place on planet earth where ecocritics are still somewhat reluctant to tread. Even Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) veers away from the ocean to focus more on how the whale metonymises what he rightly calls the ocean's “mysterious, radical, ambiguous otherness” (203). This reticence may have something to do with the fact that oceans, as Blum reminds us, have no real signposts, no places to dwell, and are so entirely other. The epistemological ramifications of oceanic turbulence were hardly lost on Foucault. In *Madness and Civilization*, he argues that since the classical period in Europe, the sea has become a manifestation of an “obscure and aquatic element, a dark disorder, a moving

chaos, the seed and death of all things, which opposes the mind's luminous and adult stability" (13).

In addition, the sea's geographical vastness threatens humanity's most anthropocentric fantasies about his place in the ecosystem. Oceans encompass two-thirds of the planet, average over four kilometres in depth, and remind of us of our relative smallness in the scheme of things, especially since they are still only the outermost layer of the planet. Nothing humbles or puts Man more in his place than being and feeling out-at-sea. Even when Byron describes the ocean as a "glorious mirror" ("where the Almighty's form / Glasses itself in tempests"), it's a mirror in which man's reflection is murky, even erased (*Childe IV*. 1639–40). Far less murky is the gendered ideology, which is clear enough. As Simone de Beauvoir reminds us, there is a troubling parallel between the deep, dark sea and Woman herself—perceived as "dangerous, treacherous, hard to conquer," she writes in *The Second Sex*, "but cherished the more for [the sailor's] effort to subdue her" (156).⁴ Simply put, the ocean can be an overwhelming line of enquiry because of its seemingly infinite roles in the imaginary. Seafaring has always been a metaphor for taking on a turbulent existence, or, in the parlance of Hamlet, a sea of troubles. Yet, as Blum reminds us, we must resist the urge to either anthropomorphise the sea or to render it as a poetic symbol, which is the longstanding hydrophobic tradition in the literary arts.

As the daughter of two of England's most radical authors and an aspiring author herself, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin had to have recognised the oceanic nature of the word "Shelley" (as in *seashell*) when she eloped with the (already married) poet and young father Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) in 1816. After he and friend Edward Williams died in a shipwreck off the coast of Italy in the summer of 1821, a death eerily prefigured by his poetical works and their repeated representations of deep-sea habitats, the sea would come to obsess the young widow. Part of this obsession is traceable to the plethora of allusions to the seabed in Shelley's verse—there are the "sea-blooms and the oozy woods" of *Ode to the West Wind* (l. 39), the "sea-flower unfolded beneath the Ocean" in *The Sensitive Plant* (l. 8), and the punning description of his friend Thomas

Hogg as a “pearl within an oyster shell” in *Letter to Maria Gisborne* (l. 231)—and the fact that Mary Shelley had not only transcribed but memorised much of her husband's poetry by the time of his death off Via Reggio. As the first editor of her husband's works, she also expanded upon the poet's efforts to make the sea an indispensable part of his legend. Shelley's journal entry, dated 31 May 1823, describes her descent “towards the sea” where she observes a “ruined church,” a rocky shoreline, boats with “white sails,” and “star-enlightened promontories” that “closed in the bay” (*Journal* 189–90). Also “closed in” is the memory of her beloved spouse, which she frames in picturesque terms: “Such is the scene – such the waves within which my beloved vanished from mortality” (190).

These close associations between Shelley's fate and the ocean established the terms for biographical accounts of his death and literary afterlife. The sea's power to swallow up, and forever enclose, the swimmer and sailor alike is described in a nearly identical fashion by Robert Metcalf Smith whose *The Shelley Legend* (1945) begins: “The stormy waters off the coast of Lerici which closed over the bodies of Edward Williams and Percy Bysshe Shelley on July 8, 1822, left all of their friends dazed and desolate” (1). More contemporary accounts of his life, such as Richard Holmes's *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1974)—with the Shakespearean epitaph on the poet's grave (“Nothing of him that doth fade, / But doth suffer a sea-change”) emblazoned on its cover—and Daisy Hay's *Young Romantics* (2010), dwell on the sea and, more specifically, in Hay's words, the “sea's ravages” (249). In short, the Shelley legend depends upon spiritual preconceptions about the nature of the ocean, a nature that Freud claimed had something to do with human fantasy of a limitless oneness with mother/nature.⁵ The sea, then, not only helps humans fashion themselves as heroic, but it speeds them along to eternity, as in Byron's line, “The Earth to them was a rolling bark / Which bore them to Eternity” (*Childe IV*. 568–9). Given that Percy Shelley never learned to swim, his death-by-drowning may have dazed and desolated his loved ones, though it could not have surprised friends like Byron and widows Jane Williams and Mary Shelley.⁶ Biographer Anne Wroe, in a chapter of *Being Shelley* (2007) devoted entirely to the poet's perilous relationship with water, notes that from the small lakes at Field Place (his childhood home in his native Sussex), where he studied the fish

suspended in ice beneath the surface, to his last residence at Villa Magni at San Terenzo, where he washed daily in the waves and even attended a party dressed as a merman with seaweed in his hair, “Shelley sought water always” (110). Mary Shelley shared this fascination of Percy Shelley’s and her water-scenes, as we shall see, are proof that she was interested in marginal, diversified places that we now identify as ecotones. Her nineteen-year-old imagination, after all, led her to invent, on the page, Victor Frankenstein who, fearing he might be “swallowed up in the immeasurable waters,” returns safely to shore. Off the page, meanwhile, Percy Shelley’s death-by-drowning was the fatalistic fulfilment of an imagination dead-set on the sea (123).

As for her influences, Mary Shelley, like Keats and Byron, read Pope’s translations of Homer, and the *Odyssey* in particular in July of 1821 while living in Pisa with her husband. Still, she hardly needed Homer and Virgil to understand the longstanding connection between oceans and heroism. This is because her own mother, regarded as the founder of liberal feminism in the West, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) had sailed to Scandinavia in 1795, bringing with her a thirteen-month-old daughter Fanny and a French nursemaid. This was the voyage that inspired Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), which begins with the author self-fashioning in the style of the seafarer. Cut from the same (sail)cloth as Odysseus, the self-reliant speaker describes how the light-house in Nidingen guided her to safety in the stormy Niding reef off Sweden.⁷ In the opening epistle alone—though she buries the fact that she had to be rowed to shore—Wollstonecraft adopts the boastful determination of an epic hero (e.g., “I did not once allow myself to doubt of obtaining a conveyance from thence round the rocks”) and defies the ocean to confine her, and to close her in, (under)stating, “Confinement is so unpleasant” (6).

A far greater influence over Shelley’s representations of oceanic ecotones was Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his apocalyptic poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, published in 1798. According to biographer Miranda Seymour, Mary Shelley never forgot that day in 1806 when she and stepsister Jane Clairmont hid under a parlour sofa to listen to Coleridge recite his long poem to Mary’s father, William Godwin, in his home on

Skinner Street. It was a “spellbinding recital,” writes Seymour, which left a deep and lasting impression on the budding author’s imagination (58). A copy of *The Ancient Mariner* could also be found in her father’s study where John Opie’s portrait of her late mother overlooked a semicircular room of bookshelves. Painted in 1797, when Wollstonecraft was pregnant with Mary, the picture remained there for the rest of Godwin’s life. Coleridge was another larger-than-life figure who loomed over Mary’s creative work. Later in life, Percy Shelley would recite sections of Coleridge’s *The Ancient Mariner* from heart and, according to Richard Holmes, Mary was eager to get reacquainted with the co-author of *Lyrical Ballads* when she returned to London after Percy’s death. By that point, she saw the elderly poet as some kind of “spiritual link with her drowned husband” (455–6).

The ecological framework that Romanticist James C. McKusick uses in his brilliant reading of Coleridge’s *The Ancient Mariner* is especially germane in this context because of McKusick’s focus on the role that boundary regions (or ecotones) play in the poem. He identifies at least three distinct ecotones present in the poem: first, the land of “mist and snow” that the albatross crosses into the human-inhabited space of the ship (l. 51); second, the “shadow of the ship” at the poem’s climax wherein the Mariner sees the ominous water-snakes shimmering by light of the moon (l. 272); and finally, the Hermit’s house “in that wood / Which slopes down to the sea” (l. 514–5). Far from mere geographical markers, these ecotones, for McKusick, facilitate the poem’s moral message: a “profound meditation upon the green world of nature,” he writes, “and the destructive tendencies of human civilization” (214).⁸ By setting his poem in a series of ecotones, where humans must negotiate a complex, asymmetrical power relationship with the nonhuman in order to survive, Coleridge’s poem forces its reader to rethink the “natural” order of things. If humans occupy the top of the food-chain, he is free to kill sea-birds or any living thing, great and small, as he pleases. But if people cohabitate in an ecotone, the Mariner’s unthinking murder of the albatross is essentially ecocide. The ripple-effects, which extend outward to the Mariner’s shipmates, include dehydration, sunburn, attacks by water-snakes and the leprous life-in-death figure. *The Ancient Mariner* is a nature-

strikes-back parable in which the simple act of bird-killing unleashes a supernatural response intended to put humans in their place and to make them bless even the ugliest creatures that share their environment. What's more, Coleridge's poem is ecologically-minded precisely because it dispenses with hierarchies altogether and flattens the perceived boundary between rational humanity and every other living thing on earth. "He prayeth well, who loveth well," the poem famously concludes, "Both man and bird and beast" (l. 616–7). In a single line, Coleridge levels all species in a formulation that places man first but in a horizontal, rather than vertical, relation to birds and beasts. What could be more damaging to the ideology of human chauvinism that drives environmental destruction than such a horizontalising of species? As Jane Bennett puts it, in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, "to begin to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility" (10).

Proof that Mary Shelley shared Coleridge's interest in ecotones can be found in *Maurice, or the Fisher's Cot*, which she composed for the ten-year-old Laurette Tighe while living in Tuscany. An entry in her journal, dated Thursday August 10, 1820, combines (modestly so) her literary productivity and a weather report: "Write a story for Laurette. Walk on the mountains, Le Buche delle Fate. The weather is warm and delightful" (136). It is not surprising that Shelley's children's story is so full of sea-scenes given that, like Percy, she spent so much time either viewing the Mediterranean or carefully documenting her responses to it. Following in Wollstonecraft's loco-descriptive footsteps, she writes from Leghorn in May of 1818 and describes the place as "cooler" than Italy's inland towns on account of its "vicinity to the sea," which she likens to a "lake without tides, blue and tranquil" (53). Her *Maurice*, which she wrote for Tighe in a single day, takes place entirely in the vicinity to the sea, and its setting is an ecotone that blends the human and the non-human.

In the story's first chapter, an omniscient narrator sets the scene in south Devon and explains that a funeral procession is taking place outside a tavern in the seaside town of Torquay; inside, a pair of villagers subsequently takes over to tell the tale. They explain,

to an unnamed traveller, that a fisherman in their community has died, leaving behind a boy, now orphaned for a second time. To them, the child (known as Maurice) remains a “creature in the world,” but the very “best” kind of creature since, having appeared one day at the fisherman’s cot, he began to fill in for the man’s late wife, Dame Barnet (77). Still grieving her loss, and in desperate need of her domestic skills, the childless Barnet gives the boy shelter in exchange for his labour. Maurice gains access to the cottage in part because of the prettiness of his face, which Barnet responds to, but because the adjectival “pretty” is used repeatedly to describe the seaside cot as well (as in “a very pretty place”), the reader assumes that the boy is already home.

Still in latency, Maurice is a boy but not yet a man, and can therefore be recast as Dame Barnet’s understudy—he cleans, mends, and manages the kitchen—whereas Barnet, every bit the patriarch, remains largely outside to fish on the open sea. “Always merry, always at work,” Maurice replaces the Dame, and, in turn, becomes a little mother, lighting a candle in the window in order for Barnet to find his way home, and reading the Bible to his surrogate father just, in the words of Barnet, “as my dame used” (83). Shelley asserts less a biologically deterministic model than a performative one: by enacting the domestic duties of the absent dame, the boy becomes something other (and greater) than a boy, which, in turn, transforms people and places. Thus, Old Barnet’s remark that “[Maurice] made the old cottage quite another thing” also suggests that the boy is remade through the reflexive work of trading places with the dead dame (83). As in the De Lacey cottage in *Frankenstein*, the Barnet cot is a classroom: a site of literacy and learning with Maurice, as teacher, reading to the local boys on Sundays. The void filled by Maurice is at once economic, educative and affective, and if his status as a proto-wife is only approximate, he is unquestionably the old man’s adopted child and caregiver, for Barnet’s motivation in welcoming him inside this homeschool is attributed to his childlessness: “I have no child upon earth” (82).

But, as the narrative unfolds, the child’s likeness to the earth grows because, in and around the “weather-beaten cot” routinely sprayed and soaked by the sea, Maurice and Barnet happily brave the elements together and live in unison within an ecotone (78). The

coastal cot stands at the foot of a cliff, below a few trees and beside a cove and a small outhouse where Barnet stores his nets. Above the roof made of moss and lichen a small “freshwater brook,” writes Shelley, “trickles from the cliff” down to the sea (78). This ecotone, neither closed nor isolated, is a diversified place: the sea sprays the windows and rises to its doorsteps and the humans therein have adapted to their environs by constructing an absorbent yet resilient roof of moss rather than lumber, which would rot and potentially collapse on them. People and places are mutating in tandem. But it wouldn’t be a marginal place that fuses land and sea if not for humans connecting diverse sources of water through the paper boats they sail from the cliff-side to the shore where they are “lost in the great waves” (78). As Romand Coles points out, “ecotones are the edges where different ecosystems meet: where forest meets field, sea meets land, salt water meets fresh water” (243). Barnet may have no child “upon earth” but he does adopt a child who straddles land and sea because, for Shelley, the ideal dweller on land must, like his environs, remain fluid and adaptable to change. There is richness in occupying the interstices.

In and around the cottage, Barnet and Maurice form a makeshift, all-male family rooted in the value of nature. Alan Liu, in the context of the Wordsworthian cottage, notes that if agrarian labour serves to bond cottagers, it also produces the indeterminacy of person and place, so much so that “the only work necessary will be dreamwork/branchwork of visual resemblance, a look-alike of Nature’s own effortless work: pure being” (320). The fisher’s cot is also a look-alike of the pilot’s cottage described by Wollstonecraft in her *Letters* and admired for its floor strewn with juniper sprigs, its muslin beds, and close proximity to the “iron sinewed rocks” at the water’s edge (8). What impresses Wollstonecraft is the family’s hospitality and what she terms the “rural elegance” of their cot beside the sea (8). The way in which Barnet’s cot is originally described is identical to the pilot’s cot and to the hermit’s cot in *The Ancient Mariner*, for it is “overhung by a few trees,” writes Shelley, “so near the sea that some high south winds [...] blow the waves entirely over it” (78).

The story's second chapter provides the back-story to Maurice's rootlessness, but in his own voice. To say that there are two sides to every story is a profound underestimation as far as Mary Shelley's fictions are concerned, and her overlapping of storytellers reflects a deeper opposition on the author's part to the perceived authority of any single voice or perspective. Therefore, Maurice explains to the traveller that in addition to being pretty, he is also too "delicate" for gruelling manual labour and that his first father's disownment led him to Barnet's door (94). The traveller now replaces Barnet while a new filial attachment re-vegetates in the same place (the seaside rock) where Maurice and Barnet once sat together (95). It is here, in the story's third and final chapter, where the boy's actual parentage is revealed: ever since the traveller's two-year-old child was stolen from the arms of his sleeping nurse, he has been scouring southern England in search of his son whom he has finally found. By its conclusion, the moss and lichen that cover the cot, as well as the ocean tides that rise to its front door, cause it to collapse, yet it lives on in and indeed as a grown man. "He always loved in his heart his pretty cottage," Shelley concludes, "and thought it the most delightful place he had ever seen" (113). Ending on the words "content and happiness," *Maurice* (like the *Odyssey*) hinges on an archetypal tale of homecoming (115). Yet the household here, far from being a stable and impenetrable structure, demands that its occupants adopt new adaptive strategies to survive in an ecotone. The cot manifests the moral of the story, which is *not* that people change and places stay the same, but that people and places are protean and mutually adapted to each other.

The traveller operates, then, in the mythic mode as a male Ceres in search of his abducted child. *Proserpine* and *Midas*, perhaps unsurprisingly, were the myths in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* that captivated Mary Shelley the most intensely and, in 1820, she adapted them as plays, again, for a young audience. Ceres' total control over the earth is a basic myth that informs Mary Shelley's conceptualisation of a close-knit family rooted in the earth. "Leave me not Proserpine / Cling to thy Mother's side!" Ceres declares in a family drama that takes place above- *and* underground, "[Pluto] shall not dare / Divide the sucker from the parent stem" (233-5). Here, as Mother/Earth aggressively protects her

child from a rapist abductor, oedipality is likened to vegetative cutting. As Julie A. Carlson points out, the *Proserpine* legend is generally “viewed as depicting the origins of patriarchy as a violent disruption of mother-daughter union by the intervention of phallic authority and desire” (178). In Ovid’s retelling of it, maternal love and protection are so deeply interwoven with landscape that, so long as the two are divided, “no seeds would sprout, no shoots would grow, / no heads of grain would nod in abundance” (V. 473–50). The denouement of *Maurice* is no less dramatic as father and son, now reunited, cling to each other, but it is Maurice whose attachment surpasses the strictly interpersonal to include the place itself. Even after the “sea washed it away,” Maurice (restored as Henry) restores his beloved habitat and not solely for himself, but for another poor fisherman and his family in need of shelter (114). The act of restoration, as Robert Elliot reminds us, always runs the risk of erasing the human in the process.⁹

Despite the blurriness of boundaries in *Maurice*, as they involve land/sea, masculine/feminine, biological/adoptive, the story is, at the same time, exceedingly clear in its opposition to two social practices in particular, the first of which pertains to labour. The story’s only real antagonist except for the child abductor who herself is redeemed, is Barnet’s capitalistic brother who evicts Maurice after Barnet’s death. The shopkeeper Gregory Barnet is a “money-loving man” who illustrates, in the Godwinian idiom, the narrowness of “mine,” *all mine* (89).¹⁰ Allowing his brother’s adoptive son to remain in the cottage for one week, he sells his boat to a friend and displaces Maurice once more. Citing his brother’s lack of a last will and testament, he assumes ownership of “all he was worth,” for “the cottage and its furniture, the boat and his nets are mine” (89). A representative of the mercantile class, with all its getting and spending, he is his brother’s antithesis insofar as his economic mode is based on personal profit rather than on bartering and exchange. Though Edward Villiers, the impoverished hero of Shelley’s *Lodore*, refers to the “primeval simplicity of barter and exchange,” such transactions are viewed positively in her fiction precisely because of their uncomplicated transparency (337). Only when Maurice, according to another method of exchange, regains his original name Henry and, by extension, his family fortune, can he buy the merchant out and inherit the “pretty, old,

fisher's cot" (114–5). Still, he doesn't keep it for himself, but shares it with those "in great want and poverty" within the community (114). As opposed to Gregory Barnet's greedy individualism, Maurice goes so far as to put another poor fisherman and his two children in his place in order to preserve a subsistence economy.

In terms of labour and the dynamics of capital, *Maurice* presents its young reader with a somewhat naïve view of the labourer and his ecosystem existing in perfect harmony together. Humans seek integration through wageless labour and the antagonism and continual conflict that Marx believed to be inseparable from any labouring commune is erased.¹¹ Like worker bees, the fishermen in *Maurice* blend with their environment, which, as art historian Ann Bermingham has shown, in the contemporaneously pictorial contexts of Gainsborough and Constable, "naturalizes the labourers' presence in the landscape, and, by extension, naturalizes the work they are shown performing there" (139). The labouring person is so absorbed into his physical surroundings that labourer and landscape blur. Yet farming afforded members of agrarian communities in nineteenth-century Europe a sense of citizenship, and the relationship between the management of house and grounds is as old as Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (362 BCE; first translated into English as *Xenophon's Treatise of Householde* in 1532), in which a Greek citizen performs a certain civic duty through managing those places. By the early sixteenth century, Europe had seen the collapse of its feudal system of serfdom, whereupon the family farm came to figure, perhaps once again, as the building block of a free society.

Meanwhile, ecologists with a more modern Marxist orientation would caution us against Shelley's overly romanticised view of rural labour, which sanitises economic production by equating republic values with an ethic of "hard work." Eco-Marxist thinkers insist that we think critically about the imbrication of capital and production in every "natural" ecosystem since, for them, no ecosystem can stand apart from the laws of capitalist production and the conversion of nature into "natural resources" and labour processes.¹² In other words, every citizen who tends the land is always-already exploiting nature in some way. *Maurice* delineates a different paradigm, however, and ends with

Henry (who reverts to the name Maurice whenever he returns home to the cottage) putting on “coarse country dress” alongside his father, who also clothes himself as he had when he was searching for his lost son. The pair “took care of the garden, bought their own food, cooked their own dinner” (112). The ideal economy is one that mirrors the earth itself: nothing goes to waste in this self-regulating and self-sustaining system. If *Maurice* is a rags-to-riches tale, surely it is an unusual one because Henry and his father return, without servants, to the cottage in the summer months to live close to the earth and to tend to the poor.

The second practice, the ab/use of animals, is also expressly criticised since this tale for children intends to entertain as well as to instruct. The setting of *Maurice* resembles an ecotone not only because of its flora but because of its fauna as well. Just as the vegetation around the cot is diverse—wallflowers, daisies, honeysuckles, geraniums, not to mention the lichens (“yellow, green, white and blue, that grow on the old thatched roof”)—so, too, are the story’s animals (93). Prior to the eureka moment of chapter three, Maurice and the traveller bond through their love of nature, for the “pretty flowers” and “little birds,” but also through their opposition to “the cruelty of those who kill them” (96). When they sail in the English Channel in Barnet’s old boat, “they do not fish, for they did not like to give pain, and to destroy animals” (113).¹³ Their relationships to animals in their “contact zones” embrace the horizontality of all organic life, human and non-human. Much as Shelley’s title foregrounds the overlap between a cottager and his cottage, or person and place, so it is a misnomer: it makes heroic a fisher who refuses to fish.

Shelley’s little hero revises the historically hegemonic ways in which humans have struggled to dominate their environs. The authors of the recent *Ocean Worlds* point out that the “origins of the world’s oceans are still a tantalizing mystery” and have been ever since the ancients set out into “unknown regions in their frail boats” (16). Perhaps the Greeks, despite their rudimentary geography, were onto something when they worshipped the sea as the cradle and grave of human civilisation. In our ongoing confrontation with the earth’s turbulent oceans, are we any less frail than the Greeks were

in their primitive forms of seafaring? Modern-day readers are likely to find a story like *Maurice* instructive some two-hundred years after its composition because we not only live in the age of the Anthropocene but in an age when the earth's oceans are some of the clearest barometers of global climate change. Over the past four decades, summer sea-ice cover has evaporated more than 40%, a matter of concern not just for humans but for other species as well; the walruses of Point Lay in Alaska, for example, used to feed and rest on the ice but are now congregating, in the thousands, on shore.¹⁴ Given that the earth's oceans are warming and rising at alarming rates—glaciologists now claim that a sea-level-rise of a mere five or ten feet is enough to flood cities like New Orleans and New York City—a world without us may become less of an abstraction and more of a clear and present danger (Gertner 50). Paradoxically, the ocean is the beginning *and* the end, or to repeat Foucault's fine formulation, "the seed *and* death of all things" (my emphasis 13).

What *Maurice* fosters is an ethic of ecological care and a resistance to the economic forms of exchange that alienate humans from the natural world. It is, as Richard Holmes describes Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, that vital source text, a "green parable" about our relationship with nature (*Coleridge: Early Visions* 173). The watery ecotone at the heart of *Maurice* dissolves the perceived gap between human culture and nature and flattens all organic life. It provides a heuristic model for the mobility of gender and family relations enacted therein. On the surface, *Maurice* is a didactic little tale, intended for a young reader, about the value of staying close to the earth and to one's family ties. Yet its message should not be limited to a single age group since this is a tale that dwells in the margins and envisions an *oikos*, or household, that is porous and diversified. Her *Maurice* concludes with the image of a father and son returning home to their beloved cottage where they "took care of the garden" and "sat on the rock near the freshwater rill and talked about all the beautiful things they had seen or would one day see" (112). It's a sentimentalised conclusion to a story about residing in and respecting the earth's dynamic ecotones and, what's more, actively preserving those places for others to enjoy. When Maurice and his long-lost father go back to their roots, they do so to enjoy nature but also to honour the other sharers of their environment. In

return, their precariously-positioned cottage is neither deluged nor destroyed a second time. They thrive on a horizontal plane alongside all of the other members of a biotic community as vast as it is vibrant.¹⁵ Shelley's message could not be plainer: we need to cultivate that garden by negotiating collaborations with conflicting interests, rather than seeking domination and control.

Notes

¹ For Byron's self-fashioning in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the cult of Byromania vis-à-vis sexuality and celebrity, see McDayter (2009), 1–28.

² In a letter to Henry Drury, dated May 3, 1810, Byron reports that he attempted to cross the "broad Hellespont" once before, but that the "North wind and the wonderful rapidity of the tide" prevented him from reaching Abydos. "I have been from my childhood a strong swimmer," he writes, "but this morning being calmer I succeeded" (64). See *Byron's Letters and Journals: A New Selection*. Ed. Richard Lansdown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³ See Christa Knellwolf's, "Geographic Boundaries and Inner Space: *Frankenstein*, Scientific Explorations and the Quest for the Absolute," for more on Shelley's understanding of spatiality and nature, in *Frankenstein's Science: Experimentation and Discovery in Romantic Culture, 1780–1830*, Ed. C. Knellwolf and J. Goodall (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 49–69.

⁴ This explains why sailors frequently name their boats after women hoped for or lost. Percy Shelley, meanwhile, named the twenty-four-feet long yacht in which he died *Don Juan*, a tribute to his friend Lord Byron, but also a clear sign of his competition with a poet and public figure more popular than himself. For a reinvestigation of Shelley's death-vessel as "the screen for multiple, contradictory projections of hope, desire, guilt and rivalry," see Donald B. Prell's "The Sinking of the *Don Juan* Revisited" in *Keats-Shelley Journal* 56 (2007), 136–154 [136].

⁵ Freud, in his best-known work and greatest work of meta-psychology, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), argues that the origin of religion is traceable to the "oceanic feeling" and to man's perception of something limitless and unbound in the world beyond himself (11), which, Freud, in turn, unmasks as man's need for unrestrained narcissism, displaced into a feeling of "oneness with the universe" (21). This paradox of a bounded infiniteness is evident in Byron's representation of a sunset over the sea in Canto II of *Don Juan*: "as if the whole earth it bounded, / Circling all nature" (l. 1459–60).

⁶ In another enactment of the Shelley legend that imagines the sea as Shelley's watery tomb, biographer John Buxton notes that Mary Shelley and Jane Williams failed to share their husbands' excitement about boat-racing, though, on May 15, 1822, they joined them for a sail on the *Don Juan* to Porto Venere and back with the sea covered, due to inclement weather, with Portuguese men-of-war; see "The Death of Shelley," *Byron and Shelley*, 1968, pp. 219–44.

⁷ For more on Wollstonecraft and her Scandinavian voyage, see Todd (2000), 368–73.

⁸ For a more in-depth reading, see McKusick's "Coleridge and the Economy of Nature" in the "green issue" of *Studies in Romanticism*, 35.3 (1996), 375–92.

⁹ For Elliot's claim that "human intervention" might disappear through nature's restoration (108), see "Faking, Restoring, Preserving and Protecting" in *Faking Nature* (1997): 97–111.

¹⁰ For the black "magic" of "mine" in Godwin's critique of a subjectivist morality, whereby individuals forsake truth and the greater social good for what is personal and dear only to them, see Book II, Chapter II of his *Political Justice*, 52–8, [54].

¹¹ In his 1853 essay on the Chartist movement in England, first published in *The New York Tribune*, Karl Marx reminds his reader that the uprisings of the lower classes have their roots in "mediaeval communes," which were "hot-beds" of strikes amongst the oppressed serfs of Europe (24–5).

¹² For the problematic relationship between natural ecosystems and historical materialism (defined as the "processes of capital production and production"), see Leff (1995), 1–15 [15].

¹³ Beatrice of Ferrara, the prophetess in Shelley's historical romance *Valperga* (1823), also espouses a proto-vegan ethic similar to the one of Matilda and Maurice, for she expressly criticises Euthanasia's fables and skins. "We destroy animals," she tells her, for "a thousand hearts once beat [...] to furnish forth that cloak" (330.) (She goes onto to denounce the practice of whaling.) Shelley's novels express a Voltairean abhorrence of Descartes' claim that animals have no souls. For Voltaire's view, contra Descartes, that animals possess feeling, memory and a "few ideas," see the "Bêtes" entry in his *A Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, 41–42 [41].

¹⁴ For the latest on record-breaking heat waves and changes in the Atlantic's currents, see "It's getting hotter," *The Economist* (October 3, 2015): 63–4, and, for climate change in northern Alaska (dubbed the "dark heart of the fossil-fuel beast") where temperatures are rising twice as fast as the national average, see "Obama Takes on Climate Change," in *Rolling Stone* (October 8, 2015), 36–45 [38].

¹⁵ For an important critical response to Aldo Leopold's theory of the land ethic and the biotic community, outlined in his foundational *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), see Andrew A. Brennan's "Ecological Theory and Value in Nature" in *Environmental Ethics*, Ed. Robert Elliot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 188–214.

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